

Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, April 11, 1901, with transcript, with transcript

Letter from Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. VILLA ISISA. Palermo, Sicily. April 11, 1901. My darling Alec:

Of course I am awfully disappointed about your lecture. You don't know how I have set my heart on your appearing before the Royal Institution now when you are in the plenitude of your powers. I don't think you were ever more clever, more resourceful, more broad-minded than now and I do want the people who saw you at your rising see you again at your noonday.

I am so disappointed. A year will of course make little difference in your power in the natural course of things, but I don't want to come abroad next year. I thought I had everything arranged so nicely, that we were to stay here until you came, have a little London society afterwards, then a peep at Scotland and then home and no more travel for years.

Still — I do recognize the point of all you say. Of course you don't want to repeat Bryan, nor do you want to do anything less than the best on any subject. So I can see that it may be wiser for you not to give that lecture on "The Conquest of the Air". But why might you not have changed your subject and spoken of meteorology? I am sure you have studied and thought as much about that as flying machines and it would surely have been a subject on which the average scientific Britisher knows less than the American. Why didn't you think of this, or Bert for you?

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I collapsed when I got your letter. Charles gave it to me on board of the boat coming here and I read it by the light coming on deck from the pilot house port hole and it did not lose

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any of its impressiveness thus with labor deciphered. What is going to happen to us now? I think I will want further news from you before deciding. At present we are here and do not want to leave immediately. It is a beautiful spot and our hotel a new one, splendidly built on terraces on the side of the hill rising steeply from the water's edge. All the furniture is English, fresh and clean, the best hotel we have been in and it is rest and delight to be here. Palermo too, is incomparably superior to Naples. I do not know that I think the situation more beautiful, there is but one Vesuvius, but Palermo is so much cleaner and the people so much superior. I am very much impressed with modern Italy. As Crawford says "The History of the South is not ended —though the Sicilians are a hot-blooded tribe, prone to use the knife and not averse to bloodshed, they are nevertheless a manly and a hard-handed race, fearing neither danger nor toil — the future holds some good thing for such a country and for such men". Pisa was like a city of the dead, clean-swept and packed in campher, yet even there the impression of deadness was not complete, for in the afternoon the streets were swarming with a busy population like ants around an ant-hill. Everywhere else however is life and progress and much building of clean new houses and pulling down of dirty old ones. More than that, there is nowhere any impression of the lazy "dolce far niente" that is said to be so characteristic of the Italians. Occasionally to be sure one does see a man, it is always one of the 3 sterner sex, asleep in the sun, but this is very rare and only emphasizes the universal busyness of the people in general. In Naples I did not feel like walking anywhere, there was such a superabundance of beggars, there are none here. We arrived at half-past seven or eight in the morning as as we drove along we saw the children on their way to school. All but the very poorest and I am not so sure about that, were just leaving home with their satchels and school books. From every doorway they were trooping, little tots smaller than Bobbie and quite big girls. Their mother were giving them the last words, putting the finishing touches to their dresses, as mother do the world over. There can be no fear of the increase of Italy's population judging by what I saw, nor that the next generation will be able to read and write. In Castellammare we found that fine large machinery made in Italian machine shope is taking the place of the crude unclean hand labor in the making of macaroni. The marshes of Paestum for

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hundreds of generations have laid neglected and deserted, given over to malaria and the herdsmen who pastured their flocks there during winter and fled to the hills in spring. We went by train from Naples to the gates of the ancient city through a highly cultivated market garden country. Here and there we passed patches of uncultivated prairie land, but the patches were small and scattered. An impression of a fertile country most carefully and laboriously worked, not of desolate death-dealing marshes, has been left on my mind. Thirty years ago one went to Paestum in fear and trembling, surrounded by guards, today it is said to be as safe as any land. Here in Palermo the same air of prosperity and work enough for all prevails. The 4 harbor is filled with vessels of all kinds, the ancient lateen sailed feluccas, the big seagoing freight sailing vessels, and the more modern steamers of all kinds. In Naples and in Rome too, one has the impression that the chief business of the place is the catering to the wants and whims of foreigners, chiefly Anglo-Saxon and Germanic. Here the people are too busy about other things to heed them.

Daisy has read my letter and thinks I have said more than the truth, that there is more dolce far niente than I allow. Perhaps I am too much influenced by my surprise that there is not more. I expected to see so much dawdling about in the sun and find instead so much work being done that it seems to me there is less indolence than there is. But of this I am certain, that there is great progress on every hand and that somebody here is working very hard or on all hands there would not be such perfectly tilled fields or cultivation on every spare foot of ground.

We remain here until Monday and then go to Girgenti, Syracuse, Taormina and Messina and thence back to Naples and Rome and Florence.

I have not answered your letters, this does not mean that I have not read them carefully and with interest for the contrary is the case. I am very much interested in all you wrote me about your ideas for your lecture. I am rather proud of myself that I did not approve of the way you were proceeding, it did not seem to me quite the right way and in your very next letter you said the same. I certainly think you could make a fascinating lecture or book.

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I do not see why you should not send the letter to Mr. Maynard, in fact it seems to me that you want to say something to him. But I 5 agree that the last paragraph had best be left out.

I am awfully sorry about Mr. Phelps's abscess. I will cable you in a day or two and I hope for a reply. I don't see why my cable went to Bell Washington. I sent it to Graham Bell. It is lovely here, too bright for you, but I like it.

Lovingly, Mabel.